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The Future of the NPS History Program

The presentation of history in public settings has recently been the subject of great debate in this country. The conceptualization of museum exhibits at the Smithsonian Institution and the Library of Congress prompted a flurry of newspaper, magazine, and television coverage; the development of standards for the exploration of history in the public schools drew significant criticism; federal funding of cultural programs by the National Endowments prompted extensive debate within Congress. At the same time, the National Park Service has reorganized and decentralized; and, in the process, fundamentally altered its approach to managing the national park system. The NPS must now decide how its history program can best respond to these changing cultural and organizational conditions.

There is reason to be optimistic that the NPS can and will take advantage of opportunities that were not available earlier. As Chief Historian (and a 20-year employee of the National Park Service), I am mindful that, while the agency has a long tradition of excellence in preservation and education that is emulated in local, state, and private historic sites, our system is not perfect. There are many areas that can be refined and strengthened.

My thoughts on the future direction of the program are grounded in my conviction that the study of history is not only relevant to contemporary society, but essential if we are to understand our current condition and create a future based on knowledge and wisdom. To be meaningful, history must be examined totally—the uncomfortable along with the comfortable, the complex along with the simple, the controversial along with the inspirational. We cannot learn from the past unless we explore it in its entirety.

In its 65-year history, the National Park Service's history program has undergone significant change. Starting with the hiring of Veme Chatelain in 1931 as the first Chief Historian, the direction and emphasis of the program has evolved with the changing requirements of the times. Chatelain was first assigned to the Division of Education under the direction of Harold C. Bryant, but quickly won support for the creation of the Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings.

Chatelain and his fellow historians (at that time, the few historians in the NPS were all men) focused on establishing a role for history within the agency, developing historic preservation standards, and dealing with the crushing demands of the New Deal programs. They had to define that role in the shadow of Colonial Williamsburg, which was successfully setting a new standard for the entire concept of historic preservation. Evidence suggests that the program skillfully combined historic preservation issues—philosophical and practical—with quality research for resource management and interpretive purposes.

Following the enactment of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, which considerably broadened the definition of preservation throughout the country, NPS historians assumed a leading role in the agency's Section 106 compliance responsibilities. The signing by President Nixon of Executive Order 11593 in May 1971, requiring federal agencies to locate, document, and carefully attend to their historic properties, further moved the history program in the direction of legislative compliance and cultural resource management (CRM). This focus on the CRM aspects of historic preservation resulted, over time, in a gradual separation of the history program from issues dealing with the interpretation of history and of historic places. Many, if not most, history research projects following 1966 were designed to provide information for the physical preservation (or restoration and reconstruction) of historic sites, rather than for the interpretation of those sites to the public. Even though much, if not most, of that research could have been used for educational purposes, the perception was that it had been designed for other purposes. The consequence of that estrangement between the history and interpretation programs was that "historians" in the National Park Service became involved almost exclusively in CRM, and "interpreters" (although many had, and have, academic backgrounds in history) designed and implemented the NPS's educational programs.

The reorganization and re-engineering of the National Park Service over the past two years has once again required the history program to reevaluate its purpose and examine its role within this

new organizational and philosophical structure. Several factors, internal and external, have influenced this process. The *Vail Agenda* (1992) calls for heightened professionalism in all of the NPS's programs and specifically recommends creating "a greater appreciation for research and scholarly activity." At the same time, it recognizes that our understanding of the past is not static, but rather "an evolving mosaic, crafted anew by each successive generation." As historians know, these are not profound thoughts. They do, however, represent a fundamental shift in approach for an agency that has not, at times, appreciated the basic nature and evolution of thought within the field of historical inquiry.

In 1993, at the request of Congress, the National Park Service joined the Organization of American Historians (OAH) in reconceptualizing the NPS thematic framework for history and pre-history. Originally designed during the 1930s, the framework had been modified over the years, but in relatively minor ways. The resulting work group, consisting of NPS historians and scholars from outside the NPS and chaired by Dr. Page Miller, completely revised the existing framework and brought the NPS's outline for history in line with current scholarship.

Recognizing the benefits that come from working closely with academic partners, Director Roger G. Kennedy, in late 1993, asked the National Park System Advisory Board to create a humanities subcommittee that would make recommendations for improving the NPS's history and archeology programs. Chaired by James O. Horton of The George Washington University, the committee consisted of Frederick Hoxie, Raymond Aresenault, Lois Horton, Laurence Glasco, Alan Kraut, Marie Tyler-McGraw, and Holly Robinson, and an equal number of NPS historians and archeologists. Written in February 1994 and adopted by the Advisory Board the following month, *Humanities and the National Parks: Adapting to Change* identifies ways to strengthen the environment for education within the National Park Service. Its recommendations are designed to strengthen NPS research and scholarship in the parks, encourage the professional development of its people, and help the agency reach a national audience more effectively with the story of the parks.

Finally—but equally important—the historical profession itself has become more interested in the public presentation of the past. The rise of "public history" as a legitimate branch of the profession, complete with its own organization, has prompted much greater interaction between the academy and historians who work in more public settings. Over the last 10 years, the Organization

of American Historians has greatly expanded its interest in public history, as evidenced by the addition of film and exhibit reviews in its journal, as well as the creation of both a Public History and National Park Service committee, the latter chaired presently by Gary Nash from the University of California at Los Angeles.

This new organizational and professional environment requires a new direction for history—one that takes advantage of the many opportunities presently available for strengthening the program throughout the NPS. This new emphasis is based on two fundamental thoughts: the necessity for the history program, in all its manifestations, to renew its links with the historical profession and its standards and processes; and the importance of the inherent and appropriate connection between the ongoing pursuit of historical knowledge and the NPS's interpretive and education responsibilities. This new emphasis is critical if the NPS is to foster a renewed intellectual vitality for its educational programs and play a more meaningful role in public education. Many of the following ideas are not new; what is different is that they need to become a regular and consistent part of the agency's way of doing business. They need to be institutionalized.

Over the past 25 to 30 years, as the NPS defined its history program within the developing field of cultural resource management, it largely lost contact with the profession of history outside the agency, and lost the sense that such contact was important. A renewed emphasis on professionalism is significant. It implies an acceptance of the need for all historians (including those engaged in the interpretation of history) to attend professional conferences and participate in the discussion that historians have about the past. For some, due to lack of travel funds, participation may be limited to following the discussion in the many historical journals that regularly deal with issues relevant to NPS sites. (The OAH recently offered all parks an opportunity to subscribe to the *Journal of American History* at a greatly reduced rate.) Subscription to journals is the most inexpensive way of keeping current with ever-changing historical scholarship.

Professionalism also means that all historical research should be reviewed not only within the NPS, but outside by scholars knowledgeable in the field. More NPS research should be submitted for publication in historical journals. Publication and a consistent peer-review process not only demonstrate that the research has met the standards of the profession, but also—and more important—results in higher-quality products. My office is currently exploring ways that would permit NPS

research to be published by academic presses at less expense to the agency.

As the National Park Service strengthens its educational role, it should also reassess the responsibilities of various offices in contributing to a revitalized educational program. In this, the last decade of the 20th century, American historiography is a most exciting and ever-changing field of inquiry. Western history, in particular, has completely transformed itself within the last decade. Likewise, scholarship over the past 25 years in such areas as women's history and ethnic history has greatly influenced the manner in which we view the historical development of contemporary society. If the National Park Service is going to contribute to the public discussion about the past, its interpretive planning and design functions must recognize evolving historical ideas and debates and engage those debates responsibly. This is fundamental to the NPS's role in public education.

In the future, interpretive materials, perforce, will be less omniscient in their approach and will suggest a greater sense of the complexity of the past. Plantations, for example, of which the NPS has more than a few, will be interpreted from at least two perspectives: the owner's and the slave's. History does not possess only one truth, but rather many truths—and we contribute to the public's knowledge about history, and the special places we manage, by presenting a past with multiple views and differing, even conflicting, interpretations. In addition, just as historical research should undergo rigorous peer review, so should interpretive programs and products. With the availability of new scholarship and exciting ways of presenting it, it is no longer acceptable to be satisfied with merely "getting the facts right."

Some aspects of this new emphasis in our work have already been implemented. On June 28, 1996, six National Park Service employees completed a four-week seminar on the history of the American Indian at the Newberry Library in Chicago. Envisioned as the first of five seminars that will be held annually in coming years, the gathering joined academic scholars, American Indian historians, and NPS historians, ethnographers, and interpreters in an intensive period of study. A successful request to the Cultural Resource Training Initiative (CRTI) fund resulted in all expenses being paid through a grant. With the intent of further linking NPS employees with

scholars outside the NPS, my office sponsored a one-day workshop during the Western History Association meeting in October 1995, to explore new directions in Western history. Spinoff workshops were subsequently held at Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park, Carlsbad Caverns National Park, and Fort Laramie National Historic Site. A similar workshop was held in June 1996 during the Berkshire Conference on Women's History in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Through an agreement with the Organization of American Historians, we sponsored a major conference on U.S. Grant at Columbia University, and Antietam National Battlefield convened a three-day interpretive workshop involving three nationally-recognized historians and museum specialists. The 1996 National History Day contest was partly sponsored by the National Park Service. In 1996, the National Park Service joined other sponsors of Colonial Williamsburg's Seminar for Historical Administration which has trained historic site managers for over 35 years (see pp. 36-37).

These and other projects and initiatives are designed to expand the opportunities for NPS personnel to gather with historians of all kinds to pursue common goals. Scholars have recognized for some time that the search for historical truth is not a solitary pursuit. It is best conducted in forums that allow continual discussion about and questioning of historical presumptions, and reassessment of presumed truths. Through its education mandate, anchored in the 1935 Historic Sites Act, the National Park Service has an obligation to present to the American public a history that promotes an understanding of the complexity of historical causation, the perils of historical stereotypes, and the relationship between past events and contemporary conditions. By recognizing and exercising its appropriate role within the historical and educational professions, the National Park Service can promote a better public understanding of this country's past within the dual contexts of historic properties and a national education program.

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Historic House For Sale

Cuyahoga Valley's Sellback Program

The Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area has developed a Sellback with Restrictive Covenant Program to help with the preservation of the valley's historic buildings and communities. This application of the National Park Service's sellback regulations (36 CFR 17), in combination with a preservation covenant, is being used for an open-market, bid-sale real estate offering. The "sellback" approach enables the Service to preserve historically-significant resources within viable communities, as part of a living cultural landscape. The program does not require the Service to act as landlord. Given that these buildings have no identified programmatic use, the "sellback" strategy allows the Service to focus agency involvement on building and community preservation.

Covenant As Cultural Resource Management Research, the first step in cultural resource management, is particularly critical for the sellback program. Identifying and assessing the significance of historic elements enables the covenant, and the Service, to preserve the distinctive features that make a property historically significant. Subject matter specialists including historians, historical architects, and historical landscape architects inspect a building's interior, exterior, and curtilage. Archeologists perform shovel tests of the site and investigate the archeological potential of the area. Additionally, a natural resource value assessment is done prior to the sale offering.

Planning for the resource—determining how to best care for the resources while allowing the public to enjoy them—is addressed in the terms and conditions of the restrictive covenant. Any proposed alteration to the exterior, grounds, or rooms that retain historic integrity must meet the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*. The covenant defines alterations as changes to the surface of any improvements including the architectural style, general design, and floor plan, the kind and texture of building materials, and the type and style of features, such as doors, windows, and trim. Alterations include construction, reconstruction, improvements, enlargement, alterations, demolition, or repair. The Service does not review

maintenance work, such as repair in kind, repainting or refinishing—provided such maintenance or repair in kind will not change the physical improvements as they exist on the date of the deed.

Prohibiting ground disturbance or excavation on designated archeological sites and excavation or grading more than 12" in depth throughout the premises protects the site's archeological resources. Requiring maintenance of identified vintage cultivars and limiting screen or perimeter planting to 3' in height protects the cultural landscape values of the property. To retain the historic scale and character of the district, the park service provides technical assistance to property owners who wish to plant new vegetation.

Stewardship responsibilities continue after the property has been sold. A recommended maintenance schedule is attached to the covenant. The National Park Service reviews proposed alterations for compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards*. National Park Service staff and the property owners meet annually to discuss future plans and past problems. If the property is going to be sold, the property owner notifies the Covenantee. The Covenantee then has the right to explain the terms and conditions of the covenant to the new owner. These provisions allow for the use and enjoyment of the resource while reducing negative impacts.

First Sellback Offer

Boston Village is a viable community, with much of the property remaining in private ownership and on the local tax rolls. The preservation covenant approach allows the community to remain dynamic by retaining their local tax base. This approach also represents the most cost-effective means for the National Park Service to protect the interests in the property necessary to meet management objectives.

Regional review of the covenant provided a variety of responses ranging from commendation for developing an innovative approach to concerns over specific legal issues. The Lands Division requested that a reverter clause be added, which would return the property to government ownership if the property owner violated the conditions or terms of the covenant. Park management